00:01 It’s a well know saying that “a lie can travel halfway around the world while the 00:04 truth is putting its boots on.”

00:06 So, it’s amusingly fitting that the quote itself is so often attributed to the wrong 00:11 person, and with its wording so different from the earliest recorded variation,

00:15 and assumed origin.

00:16 The tension between truth and myth is central to Peter S. Beagle’s 1968 novel The Last Unicorn 00:22 and the subsequent animated adaptation in 1982, but while the evolution of unicorn mythology 00:28 mirrors the distortion of Swift’s words, for Beagle the distinction between fact and falsehood 00:33 isn’t so simple.

00:35 From language obscured by riddles and references to appearances shrouded in disguise and deception, 00:41 here truth and fabrication are, as the unicorn describes herself and the harpy,

00:47 “two sides of the same magic”.

00:49 In the introduction to the 1978 collection ‘The Fantasy Worlds of Peter S. Beagle’, Beagle 00:55 described himself as a “born hider… fascinated all my life by disguise, camouflage, shape-changers, 01:02 and everything that has to be approached backwards or sideways.”

01:05 This sentiment isn’t just reflected in The Last Unicorn but seems to be imbedded in it.

01:11 In its characters, its narrative, its language.

01:14 When the character Molly Gru asks the enigmatic cat: “Why won’t you help me?

01:19 Why must you always speak in riddles?”, it’s a question that could apply to the book itself.

01:23 The Last Unicorn is a novel endlessly shifting between truth and illusion

01:28 as, in addition to being a fantasy story, it's also a story about stories and fantasies, 01:35 a fairy tale about fairy tales.

01:38 And while both Schmendrick the magician and Prince Lir comment on the fictions of their 01:42 own stories, unravelling their own narratives as they unfold, it's the outlaw Captain Cully 01:47 who directly articulates the fluidity of this fiction, its waxing and waning between truth 01:54 and tale, saying: "One always hopes, of course, even now—to be collected, to be verified, 02:00 annotated, to have variant versions, even to have one's authenticity doubted."

02:06 And, of course, this is the very state in which the unicorn finds herself.

02:10 Unrecognised, overshadowed by her own mythology.

02:13 But it's a state that drifts between truth and fantasy, neither entirely one nor the other.

02:18 The unicorn is said to be 'real', even more real than the other characters, but Beagle 02:23 simultaneously undercuts this position in referring to the rhinoceros as "where this 02:28 whole silly myth got started."

02:29 And the animated adaptation draws

a similar visual parallel with narwhals, whose 02:34 horns are documented to have been mistaken for those of unicorns.

02:38 Cully equally lives in the shadow of Robin Hood , and even though he claims Robin Hood 02:43 is a myth, a lie, he’s just as much a lie himself.

02:47 Fabricating hyperbolic stories about his adventures that bear little resemblance to reality.

02:53 This sets up the complicated relationship between truth and illusion, where truth is 02:58 never the whole truth and illusion can reveal just as much as it hides.

03:02 It’s a tension that exists in the very language of the novel.

03:06 Of course, literature is a medium in which, whether through simile or metaphor, any one 03:11 thing is almost always also something else.

But the duality in the writing of The Last 03:16 Unicorn is more specific than that.

03:18 In a way that often feels closer to poetry than prose, not in its formal style but in 03:24 its indirect use of words.

03:26 Reflecting on the nature of poetry

and prose, writer Joyce Carol Oates determined that: 03:32 “Prose, it might be speculated, is discourse; 03:35 poetry ellipsis.

03:37 Prose is spoken aloud; poetry overheard.

03:41 The one is presumably articulate and social, a shared language, the voice of ‘communication’; 03:47 the other is private, allusive, teasing, sly…

03:51 a kind of witchcraft unfathomable to ordinary minds.”

03:55 I’m not exactly arguing that The Last Unicorn should be considered poetry, only that it’s 03:60 this poetic description that best articulates its uneasy prose.

04:04 Where words playfully hint at meanings and pose cryptic puzzles as much as they tell a story.

04:10 Oates derived these distinctions in relation to the poetry of Emily Dickinson, who’s work 04:15 frequently explored the nature of truth and our approach to it.

04:19 And it’s one of Dickinson’s poems that I think best summarises the linguistic ethos of The Last Unicorn: 04:25 ‘Tell All the Truth, but Tell it Slant’.

04:28 But what advantage is there in secrecy, in telling it ‘slant’?

04:32 Dickinson seems here to regard truth as process, as something to be worked through.

04:37 Something gradual, to be approached in circuit, or, as Beagle put it, backwards or sideways.

04:45 Because truth is nuanced, mutable, as hard to pin down as illusion.

04:50 And to follow the comparison of poetic language as a ‘kind of witchcraft’, Schmendrick’s words 04:55 could be equally applicable to the writer as to the magician:

04:59 “Only to a magician is the world forever fluid, infinitely mutable and eternally new.

05:05 Only he knows the secret of change, only he knows truly that all things are crouched in 05:10 eagerness to become something else, and it is from this universal tension that he draws his power.”

05:16 And then there are also moments where even ‘truth’ and ‘fantasy’ seem to become entirely interchangeable.

05:22 When Cully’s men mistake the conjured illusion of Robin Hood for the real thing, he derides 05:27 them as: “Fools, fools and children.

05:30 It was a lie like all magic.

05:31 There is no such person as Robin Hood.”, but Molly responds: “Nay Cully, you have it backward…

05:37 There’s no such person as you or me or any of us.

05:41 Robin and Marien are real and we are the legend!”

In one way this speaks to the hope

05:46 and ideal that embodies legends, something greater than reality, but with so little distinction 05:52 between real and imagined it becomes uncannily easy for one to replace the other.

05:57 Fiction might seem as though it could envelop reality, devour it and supplant it,

06:02 if given the chance.

06:04 While present in the apparition of Robin Hood, this unease is felt much more intensely with 06:09 the unicorn’s transformation into a mortal

body. As this new human form begins to take over: 06:15 “Now I am two—myself, and this other that you call ‘my lady.’

06:20 For she is here as truly as I am now, though once she was only a veil over me.

06:25 … If she has no power to heal, or to quiet, still she has another magic.”

06:30 The idea of losing your identity to a false 06:33 appearance is a recurring one, and it appears again in the Midnight Carnival:

06:38 ‘creatures of night, brought to light’.

06:41 But these mythical beasts are really nothing more than enchanted illusions born from ordinary 06:45 animals: the Satyr is just a chimp, the Midgard Serpent a snake, and the Manticore a lion.

06:54 The mythical figures “loomed hugely over the captives of the Midnight Carnival, and yet 06:59 they were joined to them: stormy dreams sprung from a grain of truth.”

07:03 The real animals “faded steadily before the marvellous phantoms, until they were only shadows themselves.”

07:10 making even the real seem unreal, questionable.

07:14 One of Cully’s men asserts that: “eyes are easy to deceive and cheats by nature…”

07:20 So easy to deceive, in fact, that humans will take a real unicorn for a horse.

07:26 Because in Beagle’s story, humans can’t see unicorns - their eyes aren’t deceived by magic 07:32 or disguise, only by themselves.

07:35 As another outlaw continues: “The universe lies to our senses, and they lie to us, and 07:41 how can we ourselves be anything but liars?”

07:45 When writing his own poetry, Lir asks “How many r’s in miracle?”, to which Schmendrick replies, 07:51 “Two. It has the same root as ‘mirror’.”

07:54 Which is false, even in the text of the novel miracle is written with only one ‘r’.

07:59 But while this exchange might lack

technical accuracy, it provides its own truth.

08:05 The connection between a miracle and a mirror image.

08:08 An illusion based on reality, sprung from a grain of truth.

08:12 The unicorn, as a symbol, exists in its retelling, bound to reality by the knowledge that its 08:19 image derives from that reality.

08:21 So, to return to the question ‘why must you always speak in riddles?’, the cat simply 08:26 answers that “I am a cat, and no cat anywhere ever gave anyone a straight answer.”

08:31 And the same is perhaps true of writers, certainly, at least, of poets.

08:36 But I think Beagle’s riddles are ultimately concerned with honesty.

08:40 To speak simply would be to assume simplicity, to deny anything its inherent complexity.

08:47 To speak in riddles, to tell it slant, like ‘slant’ rhymes in poetry that use similar 08:52 but not identical sound, acknowledges that things often won’t quite fit neatly into place.

08:59 Joyce Carol Oates interpreted that truth, in Dickinson’s poem is “too much for mankind 09:04 to bear head on - like the Medusa it can be glimpsed only indirectly…”, but I don’t

09:10 think this is because the ‘truth’ is so overwhelming, just that it’s so elusive.

09:15 Like the Midgard Serpent, wrapped around the earth, or the lightning of Dickinson’s poem, 09:20 you can’t see it all at once - it’s something to be worked though, a process.

09:26 As Dickinson concludes:

09:28 The truth must dazzle gradually,

09:30 or every man be blind.

09:44 Hey everyone, thanks for watching yet another video essentially dealing with 09:48 the line between fantasy and reality.

09:51 I feel like if I acknowledge

my obsession with this idea here then at least 09:55 I’m kind of self-aware.

09:57 Thanks again for watching, and I hope I’ll see you next time.